

The Real Reason Women Avoid Careers in Math and Science

Remember James Damore, the young Google engineer who was sacked last August for resisting the company's gender equality programme? Damore wasn't against having more women in tech, he just did not believe the present male-female imbalance is owing to sexism and can be rectified by changing men's attitudes. The sexes tend to have different work preferences because of their biologically based differences, he maintained.

At the time we noticed an [article at Family Studies](#) by David C. Geary, a psychologist at the University of Missouri who takes an evolutionary approach to sex differences and whose research supports Damore's basic contention. Last week a paper about that research, written in conjunction with Gijsbert Stoet, a psychologist at Leeds Beckett University, was published in the journal Psychological Science.

The [paper](#), "The Gender-Equality Paradox in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education" (STEM) delivers findings that most policy wonks and gender studies professors will not want to hear: the more gender equality a country has (think Sweden, Finland, Iceland), the less likely women are to choose maths and science professions.

Conversely, countries with the most female college graduates in STEM subjects were among the least gender equal countries (for example, the United Arab Emirates).

According to Stoet and Geary, [Olga Khazan reports in The Atlantic](#), that could be because "women in countries with higher gender inequality are simply seeking the clearest possible path to financial freedom. And often, that path leads through stem professions."

The psychologists examined data for 67 countries and found that in most of them girls were as good as or better than boys at science, and in nearly all countries would have been capable of college level maths and science. Yet, all efforts to the contrary, there is a large [gender gap](#) in STEM professions in the West – especially in engineering and computer technology.

Why?

Sex differences: Girls are good at math and science but *better* on average at reading. Boys are *better* at maths and science and *poor* at reading. What's more, those "snowy utopias" of gender equality (as Khazan puts it) in Scandinavia have a bigger gap between boys and girls with science as their *best* subject.

Welfare states underwrite choice: The authors of the study note that countries with the highest gender equality tend to be welfare states – where there is less economic pressure on women. So, for example, women in the West can pursue law, medicine, veterinary science (one science profession where there is gender equality), media and performing arts, or become event planners or even childcare workers – because that is what they like. They have the freedom to choose, even when what they choose is less secure or not so well paid.

In other words, where women have a choice, they tend not to choose STEM jobs. That it's a choice they are happy with on the whole is borne out by "life satisfaction" ratings in the countries Stoet and Geary studied.

A few years ago an [amusing documentary](#) about self-segregation along gender lines in Norway's job market illustrated the point rather well. It also dared to explore, through interviews, the basic sexual differences between men and women that go a long way towards explaining this phenomenon.

One of these differences is what seems to be the natural

orientation of the female sex towards human relationships and thus reading and talking. Geary tells Khazan that the gap between girls and boys in reading “is related at least in part to girls’ advantages in basic language abilities and a generally greater interest in reading; they read more and thus practice more.”

Khazan observes philosophically:

“The upshot of this research is neither especially feminist nor especially sad: It’s not that gender equality discourages girls from pursuing science. It’s that it allows them not to if they’re not interested.”

James Damore was basically right: there’s a mismatch in Western countries between the ideology of gender equality and the reality of sexual difference. But don’t expect the equality brigade to back off any time soon.

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